## IV. The Rolling Stone

W. Somerset Maugham

I heard his extraordinary story before I saw him and I expected someone of striking appearance. It seemed to me that anyone who had gone through such singular experiences must have in his outer man something singular too. But I found a person in whose aspect there was nothing remarkable. He was smaller than the average, somewhat frail, sun-burned, with hair beginning to turn grey though he was still under thirty, and brown eyes. He looked like anybody else, and you might see him half a dozen times before remembering who he was. If you had happened upon him behind the counter of a department store or on a stool in a broker’s office you would have thought him perfectly in place. But you would have noticed him as little as you noticed the counter or the stool. There was so little in him to attract attention that in the end it became intriguing: his face, empty of significance, reminded you of the blank wall of a Manchu palace, in a sordid street, behind which you knew were painted courtyards, carved dragons, and heaven knows what subtle intricacy of life.

For his whole career was remarkable. The son of a veterinary surgeon, he had been a reporter in the London police courts and then had gone as steward on board a merchant ship to Buenos Ayres. There he had deserted and somehow or other had worked his way across South America. From a port in Chili he managed to get to the Marquesas where for six months he had lived on the natives always ready to offer hospitality to a white man, and then, begging a passage on a schooner to Tahiti, had shipped to Amoy as second mate of an old tub which carried Chinese labour to the Society Islands.

That was nine years before I met him and since then he had lived in China. First he got work with the B.A.T. Company, but after a couple of years he found it monotonous; and having acquired a certain knowledge of the language he entered the employment of a firm which distributed patent medicines through the length and breadth of the land. For three years he wandered in province after province, selling pills, and at the end of it had saved eight hundred dollars. He cut himself adrift once more.

He began then the most remarkable of his adventures. He set out from Peking on a journey right across the country, travelling in the guise of a poor Chinaman, with his roll of bedding, his Chinese pipe, and his tooth-brush. He stayed in the Chinese inns, sleeping on the kangs huddled up with fellow wayfarers, and ate the Chinese food. This alone is no mean feat. He used the  train but little, going for the most part on foot, by cart, or by river. He went through Shensi and Shansi; he walked on the windy plateaus of Mongolia and risked his life in barbaric Turkestan; he spent long weeks with the nomads of the desert and travelled with the caravans that carried the brick tea across the arid wilderness of Gobi. At last, four years later, having spent his last dollar he reached Peking once more.

He set about looking for a job. The easiest way to earn money seemed to write, and the editor of one of the English papers in China offered to take a series of articles on his journey. I suppose his only difficulty was to choose from the fulness of his experience. He knew much which he was perhaps the only Englishman to know. He had seen all manner of things, quaint, impressive, terrible, amusing, and unexpected. He wrote twenty-four articles. I will not say that they were unreadable, for they showed a careful and a sympathetic observation; but he had seen everything at haphazard, as it were, and they were but the material of art. They were like the catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores, a mine to the imaginative man, but the foundation of literature rather than literature itself. He was the field naturalist who patiently collects an infinity of facts, but has no gift for generalisation: they remain facts that await the synthesis of minds more complicated than his. He collected neither plants nor beasts, but men. His collection was unrivalled, but his knowledge of it slender.

When I met him I sought to discern how the variety of his experience had affected him; but though he was full of anecdote, a jovial, friendly creature, willing to talk at length of all he had seen, I could not discover that any of his adventures had intimately touched him. The instinct to do all the queer things he had done showed that there was in him a streak of queerness. The civilised world irked him and he had a passion to get away from the beaten trail. The oddities of life amused him. He had an insatiable curiosity. But I think his experiences were merely of the body and were never translated into experiences of the soul. Perhaps that is why at bottom you felt he was commonplace. The insignificance of his mien was a true index to the insignificance of his soul. Behind the blank wall was blankness.

That was certainly why with so much to write about he wrote tediously, for in writing the important thing is less richness of material than richness of personality.